

# FINDING WORK AFTER 55

**Don't be discouraged. It can be done.**

*by Barbra Lewis*

If a hiring manager could rub some magic, golden human resources lamp and make a wish to the hiring genie for the perfect employee he or she would probably ask for some combination of the following things: experience, a flexible schedule, willingness to travel, strong work ethic, loyalty and confidence.

There is a group of workers in the nation today with exactly those qualities, but they are often overlooked-sometimes illegally. They are workers over age 55.

In a culture that reveres youth, brazenness and beauty, it is not surprising that such an attitude carries over into hiring practices. Many Americans equate power and success with young people. And as new technology emerges and the Internet booms, young job seekers more "in touch" with computers and new media are easily finding their niches right out of college while older job seekers struggle.

Unlike our parents and grandparents--who were taught that loyalty to one workplace and willingness to follow orders were the way to succeed--younger workers are finding that job-hopping can be beneficial, that thumbing one's nose at authority can sometimes reap success, and that quitting a job to travel, marry or start a family does not necessarily mean career death.

For most workers, it is the most stable job market in American history. But for those over 55, many are left reeling after layoffs and early "retirements," wondering why the lessons they were taught about their work ethic seem to hurt them rather than help.

Dave Johnson, a 51-year-old former electronics technician from Boston, learned that his problem was a fundamental change in his industry. "The market I worked in has dried up. People would rather upgrade or buy a new stereo or VCR when their old one breaks instead of getting it fixed. I was let go by my company without so much as a 'thank you' and now can't find anything. I've got at least 20 years left in me. People over 50 have to work, too."

But there is good news. With some the right attitude about yourself and the job market, you can overcome the "gray ceiling."

First, approach your job search with skill and honesty rather than defensiveness or aggressiveness. Regardless of your age, you're still testing to see if this new company is for you, and if you are the best person for the job they are offering. Make sure you have the skills they need. Treat this job search just like would one 10 years ago.

Focus on the positive. Emphasize to the potential employer the benefits of your age. Older workers are usually free of child-raising responsibilities, calmer, more loyal and more experienced. Show that you have transferable skills from previous jobs and that your general "life experience" that can solve problems better than a new kid on the block could.

Follow the maxim "It takes on to know one" literally and concentrate your job search on employers who tend to have a mature customer base.

Keep your resume honest and clear. Do not leave out dates on your resume as an attempt to camouflage your age; an absence of dates causes unnecessary suspicion about what you may be trying to hide. Highlight on your resume accomplishments and skills you developed during the past 10 years.

Look forward to the future. "Those that still embrace the concept of the 'future' and are not disheartened by the current world will have a better chance at finding work," says Heather Wagoner, a career counselor with the State of Wyoming Department of Education. "In other words, 'That which doesn't kill

us makes us stronger."

Wagoner also suggests volunteering a few hours a week while you continue looking for work.

"Many places such as schools, hospitals, vocational-technical centers, retirement homes, and social service organizations may need the assistance you can offer," says Wagoner. "Finding work that needs doing as a related goal to your primary goal of finding full-time work may not only assist you in continuing to use your skills but connect you with individuals who may potentially be a reference for you. It could afford you a supportive structure during this time and also provide you with leads in your community to other job opportunities."

Finally, you can create your own job. Become a consultant or start your own business in which you call the shots and can work as long as you choose. Contact the Small Business Association for help. You can also work as an independent contractor, a temp, or even a "virtual" (home-based) employee, saving a potential employer overhead.

Employers are often hesitant to hire older workers because of the accelerated costs for the company in retirement benefits and insurance premiums. But age discrimination is illegal, particularly for public and government agencies. Unless they receive absolutely no public moneys of any kind, workplaces such as universities are bound by nondiscrimination laws; they cannot discriminate against applicants on the basis of age, gender, race, religion, national origin, disability, lifestyle, etc.

If you feel you are a victim of age discrimination, document what you can and contact your Better Business Bureau, the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) or the National Senior Citizens Law Center. You can also contact your state legislators to let them know what has happened to you.

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For more information:

<http://www.aarp.org/onthetissues/issueagedisc.html>

[http://www.aarp.org/working\\_options/barriers/home.html](http://www.aarp.org/working_options/barriers/home.html)

[http://www.aarp.org/working\\_options/agediscrim/home.html](http://www.aarp.org/working_options/agediscrim/home.html)

Recommended reading:

So What If I'm 50?: Straight Talk and Proven Strategies for Getting Hired in the Toughest Job Market Ever. By Bob Weinstein, McGraw-Hill, 1995.

Six-Figure Consulting: How to Have a Great Second Career. By Gary Scott, Amacom, 1997